

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What would Erich Fromm say about North Korea? A preliminary application of humanist psychoanalysis

ALZO DAVID-WEST

Abstract

This paper considers the possibility of applying the sociologically oriented humanist psychoanalysis of Erich Fromm to the evaluation of the political character of the North Korean state and society, with particular attention given to Fromm's concepts of the *matricentric* complex and *patricentric* complex, as well as to his analysis of fascism and Stalinism. The author explains that if humanist psychoanalysis is consistently applied, North Korea can be understood as a transitional postcolonial Stalinist state with a *patricentric* social order that exploits the *matricentric* complex for mass control.

Key words: *fascism, Erich Fromm, North Korea, psychoanalysis, Stalinism*

Some of the general problems of psychoanalysis consist in that it is neither an experimental nor a quantitative field; it can resort to biological determinism; and in its passage from the unconscious to sociology, it has a tendency to operate abstractly and ahistorically. North Korean studies being a field dominated by economists, historians, and political scientists, it is therefore unsurprising that no major works to date apply psychoanalysis or its revisionist offshoots to the study of North Korea and its forms of individual, family, social, and political life. Still, discussion related to psychology has appeared recently, with psychiatrist Ronald Turco (2004) providing a psychoanalytic profile of Kim Jong Il, historian Charles K. Armstrong (2005a) relating North Korean familism and mother–child symbolism to Kosawa Heisaku's Ajase complex, political scientist Sung Chull Kim (2007, pp. 34–35) briefly touching on Kim Jong Il's political psychology and the Oedipus complex, political psychologist Jerrold M. Post (2008) exploring Kim's political personality, security studies specialist Michael J. Mazarr (2008) examining the political psychology of Kim, and psychologists Frederick L. Coolidge and Daniel L. Segal (2009) conducting a personality disorder evaluation of the North Korean leader.

As these cases show, the specialists have mostly focused on individual psychology and mental illness. What insight, however, can be drawn from a social psychology of North Korea? Since outsiders cannot presently conduct independent psychological research in the country, the problem, for the time being, must be addressed theoretically and deductively. That being the case, what model of psychoanalysis should be applied? Preferably, it should be one that is premised on the material basis of social life (i.e., productive forces and social structures) and not on the forms of human consciousness (i.e., ideology and thought structures). Here, the neo-Marxist/neo-Freudian humanist psychoanalysis of Erich Fromm may have some value, especially since Fromm assumes a cultural-sociological orientation, devotes attention to the sociopsychology of the *matricentric complex* and *patricentric complex*, and has analyzed fascism and Stalinism.

Matricentrism and patricentrism

What exactly does the *matricentric* signify in the Frommian psychoanalytic perspective? Writing under the influence of nineteenth-century anthropologists Johann J. Bachofen and Lewis H. Morgan,

Fromm employs the concept as both a sociological and a psychological generalization. He uses it to refer to matriarchies, to social structures where the woman (mother) is central or dominant but not in a position of domination, and to societies in which *women are in no way subordinate to men* (Fromm, 1992a, p. 197). He also uses it to designate the psychic character structure and attitudes of the individual and society, as summarized in his 1934 essay “The theory of mother right and its relevance for social psychology” in *The crisis of psychoanalysis* (Fromm, 1934/1970):

Summing up, we can say that the patricentric individual—and society—is characterized by a complex of traits in which the following are predominant: a strict superego, guilt feelings, docile love for paternal authority, desire and pleasure at dominating weaker people, acceptance of suffering as a punishment for one’s own guilt, and a damaged capacity for happiness. The matricentric complex, by contrast, is characterized by a feeling of optimistic trust in mother’s unconditional love, far fewer guilt feelings, a far weaker superego, and a greater capacity for pleasure and happiness. Along with these traits there also develops the ideal of motherly compassion and love for the weak and others in need of help. (p. 104)

This is restated in the last major publication Fromm wrote, *To have or to be?* (1976):

Societies have been organized according to two principles: patricentric (or patriarchal) and matricentric (or matriarchal). The matricentric principle, as J. J. Bachofen and L. H. Morgan have shown us for the first time, is centered in the figure of the loving mother. The motherly principle is that of *unconditional* love; the mother loves her children not because they please her, but because they are her (or another woman’s) children. For this reason the mother’s love cannot be acquired by good behavior, nor can it be lost by sinning. Motherly love is *mercy* and *compassion* (in Hebrew *rachamim*, the root of which is *rechem*, the “womb”).

Fatherly love, on the contrary, is *conditional*; it depends on the achievements of good behavior of the child; father loves that child most who is most like him, i.e., whom he wishes to inherit his property. Father’s love can be lost, but it can also be regained by repentance and renewed submission. Father’s love is *justice*.

The two principles, the feminine-motherly and the masculine-fatherly, correspond not only to the presence of a masculine and feminine side in any human being but specifically to the need for mercy *and* justice in every man and woman. The deepest yearning of human beings seems to be a constellation in which the two poles (motherliness and fatherliness, female and male, mercy and justice, feeling and thought, nature and intellect) are united in a synthesis, in which both sides

of the polarity lose their mutual antagonism and, instead, color each other. (pp. 130–131, original emphasis)

Fromm explains that no genuine synthesis of the feminine-motherly and masculine-fatherly principles can be fully achieved in male-dominated patriarchal society, which he understood as coming into existence some six thousand years ago, ushering a “state of war” or “guerrilla war” between the sexes. He does suggest, however, that a limited synthesis appears in the Roman Catholic Church, which has “many patricentric traits” (i.e., God the Father, hierarchy of male priests, guilt feelings), yet whose religious ideology uses the *matricentric complex* in an important role. The latter adds social weight to Catholic moral dictates without reference to the moral sphere and retains the faith of believers by rendering “affective attachment” to the Church through “mother substitutes” (i.e., the Virgin Mary, the Church as Mother, the Pope and priest as representatives of motherly, unconditional, all-forgiving love) that justify the patriarchal bureaucracy and the Pope at the top ruling by power. By contrast, Fromm states that Protestantism is thoroughly divested of these “matricentric traits,” but nowhere does he say that Catholicism is matricentric in the final analysis (Fromm, 1934/1970, pp. 105; 1976, pp. 131, 176; Funk, 1997, p. v).

As is well known, North Korean propaganda occasionally extols the “motherly qualities” of its male leaders, the late Kim Il Sung and his son-successor Kim Jong Il. Of course, propagandistic exaltation of motherliness or even motherhood does not automatically make an authoritarian, repressive, and male-dominated society such as North Korea *matricentric*. North Korean sources have referred to the country as *ömöni choguk* (mother country or, more literally, mother ancestor-country), to Kim Il Sung as *oboi suryongnim* (parent leader or parent chieftain), to Kim Jong Il as *widaehan ömöni Kim Jong Il changgunnim* (great mother general Kim Jong Il), and to the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) as *ömöni dang* (mother party). These expressions are used with an inherent male bias. Reference to Kim Jong Il as a “great mother” appeared in a Korean Central News Agency website article in 2003, and was also employed for the WPK (*Korean News*, 2003). Special emphasis was given to the *p’om* (bosom) of the party and leader, a common ideological-rhetorical trope conveying, like the Korean word for “mother,” the sense of unconditional love and care for the people.

The designation of a patriarchal figure as a mother may at first seem unique to North Korea. The medieval Catholic theologians Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich, however, used

such symbolism in the notion that “Jesus is our mother,” a God-man who is nurturing, loving, and caring. That idea involves the *matricentric* at the service of the *patricentric*. Regarding the other terms, North Korean publications employ *choguk* without *ömöni*, as in *choguk haebang chönjaeng* (officially translated as “Fatherland Liberation War”) and use the titles *aböji* (father) and *aböji changgunnim* (father general) to address Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. There is also a mural in Pyongyang with Kim Il Sung’s smiling visage framed in a glowing sun and hovering behind a mass of elementary school-age children happily rushing forward. The slogan below reads *aböji taewönsunim-ün yöngwönhan uri-üi haenim* (Father Generalissimo Our Eternal Sun).

Despite the presence of mother substitutes, maternal metaphors, and maternal nationalist allegories in North Korea, such as in the psychomachian “revolutionary opera” *Sea of blood* (*Pi’bada*, 1971), the more appropriate Frommian classification in the North Korean case is the *patricentric*, a psychoanalytic category that includes affective dependence on paternal authority when the relationship to the father or his sociopsychological equivalents is the central relationship (Fromm, 1934/1970, pp. 97, 101). Contrary to the humanist psychoanalytic perspective, North Korean literature specialist and opinion columnist Brian Myers (2008) has written:

Far from being a Confucian or Stalinist patriarchy, in other words, North Korea is that very rare thing, a dictatorship without a father principle. Erich Fromm once wrote that such states can have no conscience—an assertion that Japan’s exploits under another ‘parent leader’ would seem to confirm.

This unsourced statement misapplies Fromm and his neo-Marxist/neo-Freudian psychoanalytic formulations. The claim that dictatorial states without a father principle (i.e., dictatorial states with a mother principle) are devoid of a conscience presumes that a national state formation can have an inner sense of ethics and conduct that is right or wrong. That is not a Frommian thesis, nor is humanist psychoanalysis about state power structures and their institutions of dictatorship, organization, indoctrination, and control. As political scientist and Fromm scholar Lawrence Wilde explains, “[The] idea of a state having a conscience would have been anathema to Fromm. Fromm’s social psychology applies to groups and social classes but never to political entities” (personal communication, October 13, 2008). The authority of any state in Fromm’s view is, however, manifested patricentrically in social psychology:

The psychic attitude of the child toward the father is the same one that the state desires and considers necessary among the great mass of its citizens. The state must use every possible means to present itself to the masses as a father image, and in this way to make it possible for the individual to transfer his former attitude toward his father to the rulers. *The means and methods by which the representatives of the state try to present themselves as a father image in the unconscious of the masses are very diverse.*

... Moreover, as in the case of the masses with regard to the state authority, *it is of little importance in principle whether the threat of punishment is carried out. The ability to threaten and to punish is decisive.* It is precisely this ability that constitutes, for the child, a father as the father in the specific psychological sense that is under discussion here, and [for the masses it] constitutes the state or the class ruling in and by it, as a reflection of the father. (Fromm, 1930/2000, pp. 125–126, emphasis added)

Society within the confines of the national state is, in that sense, generally father-oriented, even if this is a symbolic father. Hence, the notion of a dictatorship without a father principle is wrong both in general and in the particular case of North Korea. Any dictatorial regime is, by definition, patriarchal and paternalistic. Political scientist Han S. Park has noted that the official North Korean *Juche* (self-reliance or national subjectivism) ideology is a form of religionized “paternalist socialism,” adding, “One must not forget that North Korea is a country of paternalist supervision by the ‘benevolent’ Great Leader” and “his successors as its fathers” (Park, 2002, pp. 25, 139, 169). The central ideological role of the late Kim Il Sung in North Korean socio-cultural life, sociopolitical ritual, and political religion (e.g., sacralizing his place of birth and objects he touched, offering grace to him at meals, bowing before his portraits and bronze statues, wearing badges with his portrait) plus official translations of the aforesaid *oboï suryongnim* into its English semantic equivalent, “fatherly leader,” are among several confirmations of the North Korean *patricentric complex*.

Furthermore, the personality cult of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il – both of whom are male authority figures – involves what Fromm calls “authoritarian conscience” or “fatherly conscience,” the internalized power of the father that becomes the internalized authority of society, “a voice which tells us to do our duty” (Fromm, 1955/1990, p. 47). “Instead of being afraid of father punishing me, I have internalized father’s commands so that I do not have to wait for the terrible experience; I hear father’s voice within me and I do not risk any unpleasant event. I am warned before-hand because father is in me,” Fromm explains (Fromm, 1955/1990, pp. 141–142). When North Koreans speak of the Kims

guiding them from within – for example, after she took gold at the 7th World Championships in Athletics Seville 1999, female marathon runner Jong Song-ok claimed she ran picturing Kim Jong Il – and when the people do not organize a mass revolt against the bureaucratic dictatorship, all of that can be interpreted, tentatively, as psychological evidence of the control held over the population by the father principle and authoritarian/fatherly conscience. Fromm's other concepts of "automaton conformity" and "authoritarian idolatry" are also connected to a strong authoritarian/fatherly conscience, which in-projects duties, prohibitions, and rules.

Related to the sociopsychological condition of the *patricentric complex* and the function of the North Korean *social character* – "the nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture in contradistinction to the *individual character* in which people belonging to the same culture differ from each other" (Fromm, 1949, p. 3, original emphasis) – is the "mindset" of "extreme sexual Puritanism with more than a touch of patriarchal values [that was] essentially exported to North Korea in the late 1940s" from the Stalinist Soviet Union (Lankov, 2007, p. 128), along with the 1936 Soviet Stalinist concept of the family as the "basic cell" or "basic unit" of society, which is still retained in the North Korean constitution (see Article 78 of the 2009 constitution).

This conception of the family is in actuality a sanctification of the historically determined bourgeois nuclear family, and in Fromm's terms, it is bound up with the social structure and character orientation of the *patricentric complex*. Here, one should cite the hypocrisy of patriarchal morality, as seen – if the defector testimonies are in fact credible – in the reported North Korean institutions of the *kippumjo* (pleasure team), *manjokjo* (satisfaction team), and *haengbokjo* (happiness team), whose members consist of young girls and women. These all-female "teams" are said to have been established to provide entertainment and, in the case of the latter two, sexual services to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and the bureaucratic elite. Defectors have also reported on the *kwabujo* (widow team), whose attractive recruits attend to high-level officials (Martin, 2004, pp. 198, 201).

There is another case worth recounting from Pyongyang in 2005 when Reuters journalist Lindsay Beck asked Choe Jong-hun, manager of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, about the possibility of a woman succeeding North Korean leader Kim Jong Il: "It is out of the question," Choe said, waving his hands and growing red in the face. "If you were a man, I'd throw you off the bus" (Beck, 2005). South Korean scholars such as Jae-hee

Ahn and Moon-sook Min (2003) and Mi-kyung Lee (2004) have already dealt with the problem of North Korea as a "patriarchal authoritarian state" with a "male-oriented social structure and consciousness," whose "old patriarchal structure" has not been significantly reformed under the social changes brought about by the economic crisis in the post-Soviet era. The political, ideological, and educational structures of the paternalist North Korean state remain firmly male-centered. Fromm would not interpret such a chauvinistic and sexually unequal society as *matricentric*, much less "that very rare thing, a dictatorship without a father principle."

Although Fromm did not make a study of North Korea, it is determinable from his humanist psychoanalytic method that he would categorize the North Korean national-Stalinist system as one of alienation, that is, a system of "total bureaucratization" (Fromm, 1955/1990, p. 127), and a form of *patricentric* "fake socialism" that needs to be replaced by "genuine humanistic socialism," where "freedom of women from patriarchal domination is a fundamental factor in the humanization of society" (Fromm, 1976, pp. 176, 187). Although there are negative aspects in the *matricentric complex*, Frommian neo-Marxism/neo-Freudianism generally sees the maternal principle or *matricentric complex* as contributing to the expansion of life, freedom, and the "unconditional right of happiness," and as the predominant "psychic basis" of the (non-Stalinist) Marxist socialist program (Fromm, 1934/1970, p. 108), something that is foreign to North Korea.

As a result of state exploitation of the *matricentric complex* for mass control, there are apparently more representations of women than men in North Korean official narratives. Attempting to account for why that is, Brian Myers (2007) has said:

[If] you read [Carl] Jung and Erich Fromm and people like that, psychologists will tell you that the female archetype stands for the instincts and the male archetype stands for the intellect, and it's certainly true that in North Korea, the instinct comes over the intellect.

These, however, are not the ideas of Jung and Fromm: they are exclusively those of Jung's analytic psychology. Fromm rejected Jungian archetypal theory and the notion of an instinctual "collective unconscious," maintaining that the unconscious is socially determined, that it is a *social unconscious*, and contains socially repressed parts of human experience (see Fromm, 1962/2001, pp. 88–134). As for instinct, Fromm defined it as "a specific action pattern which is determined by inherited neurological structures," involving fixation of social behavior by "hereditarily given mechanisms." Fromm said

instinctual fixation of action was something that belonged to a *prehuman* stage of development and to lower animal life, and he used the example of insects to illustrate the point. In the Frommian view, social man and social woman, human beings, are free from “instinctual determination” (Fromm, 1941/1994, pp. 30–31; see also Fromm’s major study against the instinctivist thesis, *The anatomy of human destructiveness*: Fromm, 1973/1992b). Within a humanist psychoanalytic framework, to propose that North Korea is instinct-driven is to say that this is a society inhabited by a lower, nonhuman species. That would be a highly inappropriate characterization.

Even though Jung has something different in mind from neurologically based “instinctual determination” in his theory of unconscious instincts (see Jung, 1919/1928), applying Jungian analytic psychology to North Korea remains problematic on several grounds. While Jung and Fromm both repudiated Freud’s sexually oriented libido theory, the two men occupied two different philosophical camps. Jung with his metaphysical-archetypal approach stood on the side of idealism, and Fromm with his cultural-sociological approach stood on the side of a materialism, albeit of a compromised (non-dialectical) sort. Whereas Fromm was a psychoanalytically trained sociologist and Utopian socialist, Jung was a psychiatrically trained occultist and anti-Communist who practiced a scientifically questionable symbology. Although Jung claimed that “archetypal forms” and the “collective unconscious” are innate and universal to all human cultures, he did not make a study of Korean social psychology and mythology, and he is taken far less seriously in mainstream academic and clinical psychology than he is in literary and religious studies, where he represents the speculative school of archetypal/myth criticism. According to the Finnish intellectual historian and Jung scholar Petteri Pietikäinen, Carl Jung is a representative of “modern psychology-fiction”:

[He] developed a therapeutic belief system that offers neither empirical facts nor analytic arguments but articles of faith. Jung’s psychology functions not as a scientific theory but as a form of holistic utopia that wants to edify, inspire, and offer consolation to disenchanted Western individuals, who are devoid not of material goods but of spiritual nourishment. (Pietikäinen, 2001)

Jung was a conservative Romantic in philosophical orientation; he preferred myth over history, seeing true value not in the historical or scientific, but in the eternal or transhistorical psychic “laws” of the

biologically inherited “collective unconscious” and its symbolic archetypal processes. When he supported the Adolf Hitler regime in the 1930s, Jung interpreted the Third Reich as a form of national “individuation” (i.e., harmony of the conscious and unconscious), justifying Nazism and *völkisch* national character with a theory of the Teutonic god of storms and intuitive wisdom, Wotan. Eventually parting with Nazism, Jung drifted away from psychotherapy into alchemy and Christian mysticism (Pietikäinen, 2001; see also Fromm, 1967, p. 2). Suffice it to say that Jungian analytic psychology is not an appropriate starting point for determining the political character of the North Korean state.

North Korea, fascism, and Stalinism

North Korea is generally acknowledged to be a totalitarian state and has recently been characterized as an “eroding totalitarian system” (see Scobell, 2008). Since there is descent from the totalitarian tradition, North Korean political and ideological culture naturally has some superficial similarities with fascism. The historian Bruce Cumings has attempted to account for these similarities with the concept of “socialist corporatism” (Cumings, 1993, p. 204). Similarly, the historian Gavan McCormack has spoken of “North Korea’s unique brand of corporatism” captured by the image of the organic “political-social body” (McCormack, 2004, p. 71). Both scholars relate North Korean politics and ideology to Japanese corporatism and fascism; however, Cumings has said that “whatever [North Korea] has, it isn’t fascism—the definition of which involves an extreme crisis of capitalism. Corporatism is probably closer, since it exists on both left and right” (Cumings, personal communication, February 25, 2008). Cumings’ use of the word “corporatism” is basically synonymous with “organic nationalism,” not with Benito Mussolini’s doctrine of Fascist economic organization.

Since Mussolini has been mentioned, should a close reading be made of Kim Jong Il’s major writings against the Italian Fascist dictator’s pamphlet *The doctrine of fascism* (1932) – a work that owes much to the irrationalism of Nietzsche – symmetries will be found in their totalitarian ideas of the leader, national organic state, heroes and martyrology, and extreme subjective voluntarism. But there are also significant differences, such as North Korean isolationism as opposed to the Fascist orientation towards an aggressive growth of empire. One could argue to the contrary by citing the words of Hwang Chang-yop, defected WPK secretary for ideological affairs, who said that “since his youth, [Kim Jong Il] has admired Adolf Hitler for his capability to totally

control his people” (quoted in Jahn, 1998, p. 30–32). Admiration of Hitler’s social control system, however, is not the same thing as policy orientation. Mussolini’s corporatist doctrine and Hitler’s conception of the *völkisch* state are, unlike the ideas of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, based on divergent political-economic programs and principles.

Classical fascism and its contemporary variant neo-fascism are ultranationalist, anticommunist, antisocialist, and anti-Soviet political doctrines that accept capitalism as the natural basis of society. Besides the rise of national-populism in post-Soviet North Korea and the crude racist extolment of *minjok* (ethnos, nation, race), *minjokjuui* (ethnicism, nationalism, racialism), and *minjoksŏng* (ethnic spirit, national spirit, racial spirit) to mobilize the population, the political economy of fascism is not the foundation of the Pyongyang regime.

There are many competing academic definitions of fascism, such as in the writings of Roger Eatwell, Roger Griffin, Stanley G. Payne, Kevin Passmore, and Zeev Sternhell. But if one may consider the Marxist position, since Fromm has some indirect relation to it, fascism is understood as the product of capitalist decay and as occurring when the rule of capital cannot maintain itself through the traditional institutions of bourgeois democracy. Manifested as the most ruthless dictatorship of finance capital, fascism in power espouses a nationalist policy of populist scapegoating at home and global militarism abroad, expressed in the violent assertion of capital all over the world. Under conditions of economic crisis and social disintegration, Fascists exploit feelings of despair, insecurity, and rage in vulnerable, declassed, and demoralized sections of the population – the ruined middle class (artisans, civil employees, big and small peasants, professionals, small proprietors, and tradesmen), distressed workers, and prosecuted criminals and thugs (i.e., the lumpen proletariat) – but mainly in the middle class, diverting its hate, discontent, and trauma into racist and chauvinist channels and mobilizing this social layer against the institutions of democracy, the working class, and its forms of political organization (workers’ parties and trade unions). The fascist movement has a mass petty-bourgeois character and comes to power on the back of the middle class. Fascism, however, is not a dictatorship of the middle class (Martin, 2007; North, 1988, pp. 264–266, 1997; Trotsky, 1936, 1939, 1944).

One will find it difficult to identify anything sociologically comparable to this description in North Korea, which has been presided over for decades by a bureaucratic party-military caste, an elite with worker and peasant class origins, whose social privileges have been maintained not on the

basis of private property, but on state-owned forms of production oriented towards building the Utopia of socialism/communism in a single country. The consequence has been the retardation of the national productive forces, and the state is now in the process of an inexorable capitalist restoration that is gradually resurrecting the inequalities of the market system.

Erich Fromm would have a somewhat different take on the matter, but he would agree that North Korea is not a Fascist state. His position is determinable from the examination of fascism, Stalinism, and ideology in the two studies he devoted to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – *Escape from freedom* (1941/1994) and *May man prevail?* (1961). When Fromm spoke of fascism, he had in mind an authoritarian and dictatorial system of the German and Italian types (Fromm, 1941/1994, p. 3n1). In addition, he connected fascism with a destabilized economic situation and the social psychology and psychopathology of the middle class:

With regard to Fascism . . . the lower middle class reacted to certain economic changes, such as the growing power of monopolies and postwar inflation, with an intensification of certain character traits, namely, sadistic and masochistic strivings; the Nazi ideology appealed to and intensified these traits; and the new character traits then became effective forces in supporting the expansion of German imperialism. . . . we see that when a certain class is threatened by new economic tendencies it reacts to this threat psychologically and ideologically; and that the psychological changes brought about by this reaction further the development of economic forces even if those forces contradict the economic interests of that class. (Fromm, 1941/1994, p. 295)

Fromm did not dismiss “the problem of economic and social conditions” that gave rise to fascism. Rather, he sought to enhance the understanding of those conditions with “the human problem,” the psychological factors in the character structure of modern people that made them want to give up freedom. Fromm saw fascism as an irrational system that arouses and mobilizes diabolical forces in people, a system that involves propensities for evil, lust for power, disregard of the rights of the weak, and a yearning for submission (Fromm 1941/1994, pp. 4–6). Nazi ideology in particular, he said, appealed to the sadomasochistic character (i.e., the authoritarian character) of great parts of the German and European lower middle class. The personality structure of the “authoritarian character” represented the human basis of fascism, in Fromm’s view (p. 162). Fertile soil for fascism was the “insignificance and powerlessness of the individual,” the “despair of the human automaton,” who is

helpless, isolated, and insecure in modern (capitalist) society (pp. 236–240, 255). Isolation and an unbearable aloneness led to mechanisms for escape, strivings for submission and domination, masochistic and sadistic strivings, through which the individual could gain a sense of security (pp. 140–141, 152). That security was found in fascism, whose aims in life are the sacrifice, annihilation, and utter submission of the individual self to the “higher powers” of the leader or racial community (pp. 84, 267).

North Korea bearing no economic or psychological resemblance to fascism, Fromm would likely have described the Northeast Asian state as being more similar to the Soviet system, especially in light of the great historical and political impact of Stalin and Mao on Kim Il Sung. The humanist psychoanalyst was undoubtedly aware of the existence of North Korea – as suggested in his brief discussion on the satellite states and Korean War in *May man prevail?* (1961) – but he did not mention the country by name in that work. Nevertheless, his observations on the Soviet Union under Stalin and Khrushchev and his chapter on Maoist China serve as a guide for interpreting the Kim Il Sung–Kim Jong Il regime.

Fromm’s political analyses are relevant to North Korea for several reasons. To begin with, the late Kim Il Sung was a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) partisan guerrilla from about 1931 to 1941 and served with the Soviet Army from about 1941 to 1945. Dae-Sook Suh has explained that the North Korean leader learned about politics and “Communism” in the anticolonial underground movement and that his teacher of Marxism–Leninism from 1935 to 1941 was his superior and comrade Commander Wei Zhengmin of the CCP-led Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army. Wei was also a CCP delegate at the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935 (Suh, 1988, pp. 8, 10). The Stalinist political education of Kim Il Sung has been reconfirmed by Seong-Chang Cheong, citing evidence as follows: First, Kim, along with other Korean partisans, acquired his knowledge of Marxism–Leninism when he was a Maoist CCP member in the 1930s. Second, during his sojourn in the USSR in the 1940s, “he was trained in military and political affairs by Soviet officers” and “systematically learned the basics of Stalinist communism and the theory of modern warfare.” Finally, between 1945 and 1953, he “actively sought Stalinist influence through the Soviet military administration and the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang, as well as through the Soviet-born and trained Koreans” (Cheong 2000, pp. 135–136), who were later eliminated during the post-Korean War struggle in the WPK and in the Great Purge of 1956 to 1960.

Besides the political history of Kim Il Sung, there is also the matter of the far-reaching Soviet–Zhdanovist and *socialist realist* cultural policies that were successfully implemented in North Korea from 1945 to 1960 (Gabroussenko, 2004; Lim, 1988–89), not to mention the deep-going Maoist–Stalinist cultural influence with Chinese participation during the Korean War (1950)–1953 and the Chinese occupation of North Korea (1953–1958). The tactically motivated Soviet “de-Stalinization” campaign (initiated in 1953 and declared in 1956), which resulted in a conflict of national interests between the Soviet Union and China in 1956 to 1961, had an additional effect. Culminating in the Sino-Soviet split in 1961 to 1963 – the political dispute was exacerbated in April 1960 with the Maoist publication *Long live Leninism!* (Riepe, 1978, pp 222–223) – the conflict gave rise to the articulation of *Juche*, the programmatic “subject” of North Korean party ideological work, in 1955 and its development into an independent line and ideology of self-reliance from 1962.¹

Considering that North Korea feigned neutrality in the dispute between Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong, resisted so-called “de-Stalinization,” and declared solidarity with the Mao regime, the role of Maoist China should not be underestimated. Han S. Park observes that “North Korea followed in the footsteps of Mao in instigating concerted efforts to develop an indigenous ideology [i.e., *Juche*] and in creating a charismatic leadership for Kim Il Sung,” and “just as Mao criticized Moscow for its hegemonic policies, Kim expressed displeasure with the Soviet Union’s interventionist policies” (Park, 2002, p. 22, emphasis added). North Korean foreign students were also recalled from the Soviet Union and Eastern European buffer states so as not to be ideologically contaminated by the tactic of bureaucratic self-reform.²

During the post-Korean War reconstruction period in 1953 to 1962, “[thousands] of North Koreans received technical training in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and over 10,000 North Korean students

¹ When Kim Il Sung used *Juche* in his December 1955 speech, the word simply meant “subject,” as in central issue or central matter, and emphasized the “Korean revolution” over revolutions in other countries. *Juche sasang*, the second word meaning “idea,” “ideology,” or “thought,” was introduced in December 1962. The transliteration “Jooche” appeared for the first time in *Documents of the Fourth Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea* (see Kim et al., 1961, pp. 103, 310, 365), and, later, in a 1964 edition of Kim’s 1955 *Juche* speech. By 1965, North Korea was publicly defining *Juche* as “independent stand” and “spirit of self-reliance” in the political context of the Sino-Soviet split.

² North Korean students were apparently re-enrolled at a subsequent date. The Associated Press reported in 1990 that North Korea recalled around 2000 students and engineers from Eastern Europe and sought to bring back about 500 students from the Soviet Union (*Seattle Times*, 1990).

were enrolled in universities and colleges in Soviet-bloc countries” (Armstrong, 2005b, p. 169). As a consequence of the Soviet “de-Stalinization” campaign, Sino-Soviet dispute, and Sino-Soviet split, North Korean students were enrolled into Chinese schools for the next two decades. Their exposure to Maoist ideology and politics was ostensibly incorporated after they returned to North Korea. The regime, after all, adopted voluntarist Chinese methods of nationally self-contained socialist construction from 1962 to 1983 (Trigubenko, 1996, p. 143).

Fromm approached the Soviet Union and China with a primary interest in foreign policy. Speaking of the Soviet case in particular, he explained, “What matters for the evaluation of its foreign policy is its social and political structure, however, and *not its ideology*,” Soviet ideology being a ritualized substitute for Soviet reality (Fromm, 1961, p. 137, emphasis added). Furthermore, “it is the very nature of ideology that it deceives not only others, but also those who use it. Hence the only way of recognizing what is real and what is ideology is through the *analysis of actions* and not in accepting words for facts” (p. 130, emphasis added). On this matter and in his appraisal of the Soviet Union from Stalin to Khrushchev, Fromm was influenced by the theory of state capitalism developed by the ex-Trotskyists Raya Dunayevskaya, C. L. R. James, and Tony Cliff, their basic thesis being that the Stalinist Soviet Union was fundamentally a capitalist society. Fromm, although agreeing with that theory, said the phrase “state capitalism” contained ambiguities and difficulties. He opted instead for “state managerialism,” which he expressed in several other combinations.³

Departing from the Marxist definition of class, Fromm held that the Soviet Union was a rigid “class” system ruled by a privileged minority of state-appointed managers who did not own the means of production, but still controlled them. This ruling stratum consisted of an overlapping managerial bureaucracy, political bureaucracy, and military bureaucracy (Fromm, 1961, p. 54). The difference between the “state managerialism” of Stalin and Khrushchev, Fromm argued, was that the former was maintained as a *terroristic state* exercising manipulation by violence, and the latter was maintained as a *police state* that abolished terror, slave labor camps, and arbitrary arrests and punishments, gradually exercising manipulation by mass

suggestion. Both cases, nonetheless, owed their existence to Stalin, who, after 1923, introduced the formula of *socialism in one country* and the method of “totalitarian state planning,” which liquidated the socialist revolution in the name of socialism and placed Russian national interests before internationalism.

The Soviet Union was not a socialist system – an unalienated, democratic, participatory society – but an authoritarian one based on the nationalization of enterprises and overall planning sharing features of capitalism. Moreover, the Soviet Union, which had nothing to do with communism and world revolution, forced its social and political system through foreign military occupation in Eastern Europe, as well as in northern Korea, to ensure postwar Soviet security and economic recovery. The brief period of postwar Soviet expansionism, Fromm notes, was largely part of a defensive strategy of the conservative Stalinist regime and constituted a “very limited form of imperialism” (pp. 112, 117). Although Fromm does not mention the US–Soviet occupation and division of Korea in *May man prevail?*, he observes that the peninsula was of strategic importance in the Far East, prompting a Soviet-sponsored (North Korean) attack against South Korea, with Stalin miscalculating US intervention and the Americans miscalculating the Chinese response.

From a Frommian perspective, the Soviet-overseen “North Korean revolution,” as the historian Charles K. Armstrong has termed it, was not an “authentic Communist-national revolution,” as in Yugoslavia in 1948 or China in 1949, both of which asserted independence from Moscow (Fromm, 1961, pp. 105n50, 117). Rather, as substantiated in recent historical scholarship, North Korea was a state that began as a Soviet satellite from 1945 to 1950 – the Soviet Army left in late December 1948 after the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was declared on September 9 – in which Stalin’s theory of *socialism in one country* was adopted as official policy, whereupon a managerial-political-military bureaucracy was consolidated. After the Korean War, a “totalitarian state managerialism” employing the methods of overall “totalitarian state planning” fully materialized. Subsequently with the adoption of the Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea on 27 December 1972, the regime eventually declared political independence from the Soviet Union and China.

A feature distinguishing North Korea from the satellites in Eastern Europe is that this was a state whose development under the Soviet military coincided with the worldwide colonial revolution after World War II. Korea was a colonial subject of Imperial Japan from 1910 to 1945, and the man

³ The other terms Fromm uses are “conservative, hierarchical system,” “conservative, industrial class society,” “managerial bureaucratic system,” “industrial state managerialism,” “reactionary state managerialism,” “reactionary welfare state,” “totalitarian managerialism,” and “totalitarian state managerialism” (see Fromm 1961, pp. 34, 41, 42, 43, 76, 84, 88).

whom the Soviets chose for the leadership of the regime, Kim Il Sung, was, as mentioned earlier, a partisan in the anti-colonial guerrilla movement. Fromm said, “The underdeveloped nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America...have in common a formula that, in its simplest form, is: nationalism (political independence) plus industrialization” (Fromm, 1961, p. 141). Even with a policy of proactive Soviet cultural assimilation formalized with the Economic and Cultural Agreement of 17 March 1949, North Korean assertions of nationalism, national liberation, and national independence had no counterpart in the other satellite states (Armstrong, 2003, p. 189), that being a reflection of the political and psychological strivings of a once-colonized people, even under Stalinist leadership, for political autonomy and self-determination.

The advent of the Chinese Revolution, which marked the end of Western colonialism (Fromm, 1961, p. 142), was an emboldening event for the bureaucratic North Korean regime and factored into Kim’s decision to reunify the Korean peninsula by military force. The resultant US invasion and total leveling of North Korea through saturation bombing led to the deepening of anticolonial and anti-imperialist nationalism in the country, as well as to the political-psychological identification of the USA with Japanese fascism, an association that is seen in North Korean political posters (Figure 1). One should note that, despite its anticolonial or anti-imperialist articulations, nationalism does not in the end challenge, but seeks a more accommodating relationship with, American and world imperialism. On the psychoanalytic position, Fromm said that nationalism is an incestuous and insane idolatry with patriotism as its cult, and he held that fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism were each drastic blends of

“state and clan worship” (Fromm, 1955/1990, pp. 57, 58).

Relevant to the problem of nationalism, South Korean academic Byoung-Lo Philo Kim makes the following observation about the US military intervention and its sociopsychological and ideological consequences in North Korean history:

The ideology of self-reliance [*juče*] in North Korea appears to have easily been strengthened by the extreme trauma of U.S. bombing which destroyed 99 percent of all above-ground structures in two and one-half years. More bombs were unleashed than on all of Europe in World War II. Through the experience of the war, North Korea became a xenophobic, perhaps paranoid, nation. North Korea evolved into a notoriously suspicious state toward all foreigners. It works very hard to maintain a policy of maximum insulation from the outside world. The war also intensified the fear that openness to foreign ideas may subvert the country’s official ideology and transform the North Korean people’s attitudes and lifestyles.

The admiration of Kim’s composure under bombardment and of his determined planning was accelerated by the result of the war. The fact that the war left a significant amount of orphans and broken families [is something that] would foster acceptance and admiration of Kim among the North Koreans. Among the 10 million of [the] North Korean population in 1950, 2.5 million died and the casualties probably doubled the number of the deaths. These statistics indicate that almost 75 percent of North Koreans were either killed or injured. This provided the sociological base for the acceptance of the *juče* ideology by the majority of [the] North Korean people. For them, it would be easy to praise Kim Il Sung for their lives. (Kim, 1995, p. 170)

The colossal material and human catastrophe of the Korean War created a shift in the North Korean *social character* that was favorable for North Korean national-Stalinism. In connection with the socio-psychological shift, Kim Il Sung’s 1955 *juče* speech appeared in the middle of the postwar Chinese military occupation. Fromm explains that the Chinese added new elements to the Confucian tradition: “a peculiar mixture of religious fervor, Russian methods of obtaining confessions and self-accusations, and the most advanced psychological method of persuasion” (Fromm, 1961, p. 143). There is no doubt that Kim learned from the Chinese.⁴ Korea, moreover, had been the most Confucian of the Confucian-patriarchal countries.



Figure 1. Undated North Korean poster: “Brutality, Pillaging, Viciousness. Exactly the Same Bastards!”

Source: David Heather and Koen De Ceuster, *North Korean Posters* (New York: Prestel, 2008), p. 118.

⁴ For example, citing the problem of insufficiently trained party cadres, Kim, in his concluding speech to the Plenum of the Central Committee of the WPK on 4 April 1955, quoted the words of Mao Zedong as to how the matter could be resolved (see Kim, 1964, p. 9).

What is notable about the *Juche* speech, based as it is on the nationalist program of *socialism in one country*, is that while it declared political solidarity with the Soviets and Chinese, calling that “internationalism,” the document asserted certain prerogatives against the authority of the two great powers: North Korean national interests would come before those of the Soviet Union and China; North Korea would decide on its own which Soviet and Chinese methods and experiences to assimilate for its internal purposes; and North Korea would not adopt the Soviet de-Stalinization campaign (Kim, 1955/1965, pp. 324–327). This was a simultaneous expression of national-Stalinism and anti-colonial nationalism. The Kim Il Sung regime adopted and assimilated Maoist methods, such as anthropocentric voluntarism and mass line leadership, to be sure; however, the decisive formative model was the Stalin-era Soviet Union. North Korea from roughly 1956 to 1996 – from the Great Purge to the Great Famine – was the postcolonial equivalent of Stalin’s *terroristic state*, with the present-day Kim Jong Il regime transitioning towards something generally comparable to Khrushchev’s reactionary *police state*, to use Fromm’s terms.

Since the end of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries, along with the transformation of China into a capitalist state, North Korea has confronted an economic and ideological crisis. Having dropped from its 1992 and 2009 constitutions references to the Soviet national ideologies of “Marxism-Leninism” and “Communism” for their lack of profit in a post-Soviet world, but not abandoning the Stalinist political perspective upon which the North Korean state was established, the Pyongyang regime now resorts to national-populism and “defensive war nationalism” (Kang, 2007, p. 99) under the name of *Songun* (military-first) ideology, in a desperate attempt to uphold its political legitimacy.

Conclusion

Psychoanalysis has yet to make inroads into the field of North Korean studies. While the sociologically oriented humanist psychoanalysis of Erich Fromm shows some promise, it requires contextualization, expansion, and updating in the contemporary North-east Asian social, political, and cultural situation. Nonetheless, a preliminary application of Fromm’s psychoanalytic categories to the North Korean case suggests that North Korea is a *patricentric* postcolonial social order; the regime is presided over by an authoritarian bureaucracy that exploits the *matricentric complex* for mass control; the

state structure is modeled on the totalitarian Soviet Stalinist system; and a transition is underway from a Stalinist *terroristic state* to a *police state*.

Fromm’s redefinition of class, upon which his state capitalist theory of “totalitarian state managerialism” is based, positing that North Korea has always been a capitalist society, is obviously problematic. Fromm did, nevertheless, make a creditable prediction in 1958 that the capitalist USA and Stalinist Soviet Union would be more similar than different in 20 years for the reason that they were, despite political divergences, both bureaucratically mass-managed societies (Fromm, 1958). China turned to capitalism through market reforms in 1978, and the Soviet Union did so through the program of *perestroika* in 1985 and juridical self-liquidation in 1991. In each case, members of the bureaucratic nomenclature were transformed into capitalist managers. A similar course of development is occurring in North Korea today, with the bureaucracy studying how the Chinese Stalinists successfully marketized their autarkic economy and retained the authoritarian regime. (On economic changes and marketization in North Korea, see Lim, 2009.)

That said, psychoanalysis should not subordinate North Korean economics and politics to North Korean propaganda. Fundamentally, North Korea as a state and society cannot be understood through its forms of propaganda alone, for propaganda is a technique of thought manipulation that political organizations use to influence mass opinion. Propaganda is also a medium of ideology, and ideology in bureaucratically ruled states is an inauthentic experience, an alienated idea, a cover-up with moral overtones, a rationalization that is administered for social control (Fromm, 1961, pp. 104n50, 117). Because propaganda is a concealing of reality, it is inadequate as the primary matter for understanding a political system. What is needed in a social psychology of North Korea, especially if humanist psychoanalysis is to be employed, is a historical analysis of the social and political structure in combination with an examination of the forms of cultural and psychological life.

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Author

Alzo David-West is a lecturer at Aichi Prefectural University in Japan, the newsbriefs editor for *North Korean Review*, and an ABD in communication at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. He holds an English MA from East Carolina University and an English BA *magna cum laude* from Chowan University in the USA. His publications have appeared in *Art Journal*, *Cosmos and History*, *Cultural Logic*, *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Jung Journal*, *North Korean Review*, and *Review of Korean Studies*.